

## **Raising Awareness of Domestic Violence in October**

**By: Stephanie Herseth Sandlin**

As October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month, I wanted draw the attention of South Dakotans to the impact this tragic cycle has on families and communities in our state and across the country. Domestic violence is a problem that destroys lives and shatters communities. According to a survey conducted by the Department of Justice, nearly one in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime and approximately 2.3 million people each year in the United States are raped or physically assaulted by a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend. The Journal of Family Psychology reports that as many as 15.5 million children are exposed to domestic violence every year.

We are not insulated from this alarming trend in our state. In South Dakota in 2007, 15 people were murdered. Of those 15 murders, 14 were related to domestic violence. The problem of domestic violence in Indian Country is particularly acute. In 2007, Amnesty International issued a report entitled, "Maze of Injustice: the failure to protect Indigenous women from sexual violence in the United States." The report found that Native American women are nearly three times as likely to suffer sexual violence as non-Native women.

While the cycle of domestic violence continues, increases in resources to combat domestic violence have been effective. This year marked the 15th anniversary of the enactment of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which authorized programs that seek to prevent and prosecute violence against women and strengthen services to victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. Research indicates that VAWA saved nearly \$14.8 billion in net averted social costs in its first 6 years alone. Moreover, the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that more victims now report domestic violence to the police, an increase of up to 51% in reporting rates by women and a 37% increase in reporting rates by men.

The success of programs established through VAWA have helped to make critical strides in addressing domestic violence and I have supported and continue to support strong funding levels for the Violence Against Women Act, which is an indispensable federal partner for domestic violence prevention efforts. That's why I'm pleased that this year, the economic recovery and stimulus legislation provided \$225 million to VAWA programs. Moreover, the

House Fiscal Year 2010 Commerce, Justice and Science Appropriations Act would provide \$400 million for programs authorized through VAWA. The Senate has been considering its own version of this bill and I hope it will provide similarly robust funding levels for these critical programs.

However, increased resources and legislative action alone will not solve the problem of domestic violence. That's why it's important during the month of October that we also recognize the work of individuals and organizations across South Dakota who support victims of domestic violence and tirelessly work to bring this tragic cycle to an end. In 2007-2008, South Dakota shelters served more than 17,791 people and the importance of their work to support victims cannot be underestimated. It is not only their individual and organizational efforts, but the cooperation and joint efforts of many individuals and organizations that creates a tremendous team working on behalf of victims of domestic violence.

Domestic violence is an issue that brings people together in the vitally important effort to increase public awareness to address the special needs of victims of domestic violence, including the elderly, homeless, disabled, children, and youth from all communities, and to prevent future abuse. We need to reach children and students to educate them about domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking. Further, we must fully understand and respond to the needs of women and children who have been battered. Constant vigilance and effort will be required to make sure we continue to make progress in reducing the incidences of domestic violence, but with the efforts I've seen in South Dakota, I have no doubt we can succeed.